

PHIL 20C / HOLDEN / SPRING 2007

HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY: EMPIRICISTS TO KANT

FIRST PAPER ASSIGNMENT

DUE DATE: In class, Monday April 30th

(Late papers will be severely penalized.)

4-5 pages maximum length, double spaced, reasonable font size

COMPOSITION:

The question asks you to *reconstruct an argument from Locke*. Your reconstruction should clearly identify and distinguish the argument's various assumptions, it should clearly explain the inferences made in that argument, and (of course) it should also clearly set out the intended conclusion of that argument.

The question also asks you to present a '*reasoned evaluation*' of that argument. A 'reasoned evaluation' will involve raising one or two of the best objections you can to Locke's argument. (These objections might challenge one of the more questionable premises in the argument, or they might challenge one of the inferences. The objections might be original to you, drawn from your reading of the secondary literature [with appropriate credit given], or they might come from class discussion etc...) On Locke's behalf, you should then offer the best response(s) you can to these objection(s). Finally you should adjudicate. Is the objection ultimately successful and the best response available a failure? Is the argument sunk? Or can the argument be successfully defended against the best available objection? Is the argument sound?

Grading is based on accuracy, completeness, and philosophical acuity of the essay considered as a response to the question posed. Clear, precise writing is also essential.

SUPPORT FROM THE INSTRUCTOR AND TAs:

The instructor and the TAs are very happy to meet with you to discuss your papers as you are thinking about them and putting them together (preferably during official office hours if you can make it then). We can talk about your overall strategy for the paper and the various arguments, objections, responses etc... you are considering. We can talk about the various philosophical issues that come up, work through your arguments and so on.

However, neither the instructor nor the TAs will be reading drafts. We are happy to talk about the philosophical substance of your arguments and objections, but we don't want to get into close editing and micro-management of your paragraphs and sentence structure. Getting these various fine-grain details right is *your* job: the assignment is partly about your showing that *you* can clearly organize and articulate your ideas.

Note also that you can get writing assistance from the CLAS writing lab: for details see <http://www.clas.ucsb.edu/>

SOURCES, ORIGINALITY & PLAGIARISM:

The paper must be the student's own work. Students are certainly encouraged to talk to classmates about these issues, but must take care not to incorporate others' ideas without explicit acknowledgement. Students may also consult the secondary literature in order to confirm their own understanding of the material or to stimulate their own thoughts (note that the syllabus includes a list of the most useful secondary literature); however the use of such secondary literature is not expected or required.

Any material taken directly from another person must be placed in quotation marks, with the source explicitly cited. Whenever others' ideas are used or discussed without taking material directly from their writings, the source of those ideas must be explicitly cited as well. *Departures from this policy may amount to plagiarism.*

(For the policy on plagiarism, see the syllabus.)

THE ASSIGNMENT: WRITE A SHORT ESSAY IN RESPONSE TO THE FOLLOWING PROMPT

(It is important to answer every part of the question; each successive part should be thought of as leading the essay writer step-by-step through the writing of a satisfactory short essay.)

Locke devotes Book 1 Chapter 2 of the *Essay* to attacking the nativist doctrine that there are "innate principles" in the mind, i.e. that the mind comes pre-equipped with knowledge of certain truths, quite independently of experience.

- (i) What sort(s) of knowledge do nativists think is (are) innate in the mind? Give one or two examples. (Why do nativists think that certain sorts of knowledge are innate?)
- (ii) Explain the structure of Locke's argument against the doctrine of innate knowledge in Book 1 Chapter 2. * Reconstruct his argument *using your own words*, but also document your interpretation of his reasoning with appropriate references to or quotations from particular paragraphs of Locke's text.
- (iii) Present a *reasoned evaluation* of Locke's argument. (See above for the definition of a 'reasoned evaluation'.) Does Locke successfully refute the nativists on this issue, or does his attack fail?

* Note that this is Book 1 Chapter 2 in our edition of Locke's *Essay*. In certain other editions of Locke's *Essay*, this chapter (entitled "No innate principles in the mind") occurs as Book 1 Chapter 1 instead.

WRITING PHILOSOPHY PAPERS – SOME POINTERS

What is wanted from a philosophy paper is not quite the same as what is (typically) wanted from a paper for other humanities subjects like History or English. *Ignore this difference at your peril!*

Try to think of an essay in philosophy as more akin to a scientific report than a literary essay -- it should be as objective and uncluttered as possible, and as clear, precise and well organized as you can manage. A good model to bear in mind is that of a civil servant's report or briefing to her superiors. Imagine you are a civil servant whose task is to brief some not-too-bright superiors on the rights and wrongs of an issue. The superiors do not want to appear foolish, so they must show that they are on top of the issue. So your briefing should not overlook any angles. They do not want flowers and bells, but they want the basic structure, and they want to know what is at the heart of the issue, and the strength and weaknesses of the cases that can be made. They want an objective, clinical look.

Things to bear in mind:

(1) Since writing philosophy is all about reconstructing and critically examining (often fairly complex) arguments, it is particularly important to think carefully about the *structure* and *clarity* of your paper. The issues under discussion will typically be difficult enough to unravel without the added confusion of poor layout and unclear writing. SO: *Try to make your paper as systematic and well organized as possible.*

(2) Philosophical confusions often arise from the imprecise or ambiguous use of language, so keep your writing as clear and accurate as possible. Since clarity is so important to a careful examination of the argument at hand, be sure to avoid unnecessarily flowery or poetic writing. Beware verbosity and pretentious pseudo-philosophical wordplay! Try to say what you mean as directly and straightforwardly as possible. And always go back over what you have written to try to clarify any areas that seem confusingly written or ambiguous. SO: *Keep your writing style as simple and clear as possible.*

(3) It is important that you stay on topic. If the instructor wants the student to examine a particular argument then they want them to stick to an analysis of *that* argument -- rather than wandering off into discussions on other arguments and issues that aren't clearly related to the question at hand. Nor do they want the student to waste valuable space on windy rhetoric: grandiloquent introductions about "*this profound and weighty issue, which has vexed the greatest minds since time immemorial and which still challenges us all in these changing times today*" can go for a start. This is boilerplate waffle, and pompous to boot. Leave it out. Cut to the chase, and stay on it. SO: *Keep your paper on the point and avoid what is irrelevant and distracting from the precise issue under discussion.*

(4) Contrary to the dogmas of certain prudish high school teachers, in writing a philosophy paper it is perfectly okay to use the first person ("*I think that...*") when setting out your own opinions. (If you want to. It's up to you.)

(5) Finally, note that the course web site <http://www.philosophy.ucsb.edu/websites/phil20C/> also has a link to a very helpful site offering 'Guidelines on Writing Philosophy Papers'.